



Tan, Kai Syng ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4491-7166>
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WHAT HAS RUNNING GOT TO DO WITH OUR DIVIDED WORLD?

16th November 2016

Written by:



Kai Syng Tan FRSA

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SAVE TO MY RSA

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Artist-curator Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA provides a rundown of how artists use running to think about the world around us, and invites you to join her at the upcoming RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale 2016 #r3fest, a relay of three cross-country events (co-curated with Annie Grove-White and Dr Carali McCall).

Run for your lives

Fancy running after a moving truck? What about taking things to the next level, by climbing over a £1.9 million four-meter wall, before you hit the road – and encounter the possibility of being run over? Intrigued? Then sign up for the toughest race on earth. I am not referring to the endurance event Tough Mudder's latest attractions. I'm talking about perilous journeys made by people running away from persecution, towards better lives.

Metaphor, methodology, material

Last summer, I created a drawing to draw out the irony between the grueling and exorbitant journeys that migrants were undertaking to seek asylum, with grueling and exorbitant endurance races that niche but growing groups of people amidst the running/fitness boom, chase in the name of fitness, adventure and/or self-fulfilment.

Drawn like a grotesque board game, Certainly the Toughest UltraMarathon of Your Life (2015) depicts 'escapees' of Europe heading for the 'exotic' south, along the way conquering natural and/or manmade obstacles with their heroic prowess and neoliberal energy, packs of time and money (with added protein shake). Through the work, I want to open up a critical space to ask: freedom of movement may be a human right, but in a world in (com)motion, what does it mean to be an exile - forced or voluntary - to be 'on the run'? With the impending erection of new walls in Calais, Mexico and elsewhere, in what ways could running be mobilised as a metaphor, methodology and material?

Running into people from all walks

I am not exonerated from this process of inquiry. I am looking too at my own hypocrisies as an artist who has the choice, and privilege to run, to live her life on the run, and to use running in her work. This discourse involves thinking about other people who use running in all sorts of ways – and it is just as well that the Latin origin of the word 'discourse' refers to 'running from place to place'. A Mile In Her Shoes, for example is a London charity that helps women who are affected by homelessness to 'find their feet through running' What can I, and other runners, learn from this?

For Canadian-born Londoner and artist, Carali McCall, running is a form of drawing. By extension, the city is a canvas for her body to draw on, to express, to wrestle with. In Work no. 4 (Restraint Running) Back Hill (2013), the artist attaches herself to a bollard via an elastic material, and runs back and forth from it repeatedly – until the band snaps! Carali's work's raises the question: how running (dis)connects Londoners with the city, and to one another?

The eloquence of running to articulate the tension, and trek, between life and death is at the heart of Eddie Ladd's Ras Goffa Bobby Sands/The Bobby Sands Memorial Race (2010). Throughout the hour-long performance, the Welsh performance-maker runs on an oversized treadmill. Requiring and revealing strength and stamina as it does vulnerability and despair, Eddie's piece not only pays tribute to the famed Irish Republican Army hunger striker Bobby Sands who was also an amateur runner, but the everyman in their daily grind.

And everywoman, for gender does come into play in this discourse. If people cannot run away from conflict areas staying alive can be tough—particularly for women. Running can thus become a demonstration of being alive, as the work of Free To Run, an NGO set up by Canadian human rights lawyer Stephanie Case for women and girls in Afghanistan, South Sudan and other places show. In other words, we run, to let our imagination run riot, to run away, to not run away, to remind ourselves of death, and of life.

A tough and terrific cacophony

Myself, Carali, Eddie and A Mile In Her Shoes are amongst a digressive and disparate collage of 27 artists, academics, and runners from 16 institutions who will gather at the RUN! RUN! RUN! Biennale 2016, sponsored by Leeds College of Art. We will share our artworks, papers, and experiences, and chat, learn from one another in Leeds, London and Cardiff. Members of Free To Run may also join us digitally in Leeds. Carali and Eddie are amongst a few artists who are premiering new performances inside the stunning National Athletics Indoor Stadium in Cardiff.

The Biennale follows in the footsteps of the 2014 premiere, then long-windedly-named the RUN! RUN! RUN! International Festival of Running. The festival was applauded by the Guardian for its 'positive atmosphere', and by participants for its unusual focus on running as an arts and humanities discourse, and for its innovative format montaging quick-fire presentations with running tours, and an art exhibition with films by emerging social enterprises.

The Biennale also provides an update to the well-trodden paths created by the canon of walking which has often focused on the very white, very male and sometimes drugged-out (see Baudelaire, Benjamin, Richard Long and Will Self). Just as women have always walked, they have always run, and run well. The Biennale's line-up of females and males activate running as creative and critical toolkits to engage with the body, and to engage with other bodies in the city and across borders.

Grab your free tickets. Follow the discussions on twitter via #r3fest. We look forward to running into you.

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